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Watch and Learn: Peer Evaluation and Tutoring Pedagogy

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By observing fellow tutors' consultations, writing center tutors improve their abilities to evaluate their own practices when working with students.

Jane Van Slembrouck

How can we as writing center directors strike a balance between evaluating tutors and allowing them to become independent, self-reflective thinkers? One solution I've found has been to ask tutors to observe and evaluate one another's tutoring.

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Questions about tutor training and evaluation have been on my mind since I added the job of writing center director to my full schedule of graduate student responsibilities last year. **Fordham University** has long made it a practice to appoint English PhD students to short-term positions as directors at each of its two main campus writing centers **[1]**. These positions offer an extraordinary opportunity for professional development for advanced graduate students with backgrounds in teaching and tutoring. Now, with one year of experience managing **Fordham's Rose Hill** center in the Bronx behind me, I am in my second, and final, year on the job. My tutoring staff consists of graduate students from several humanities departments who tutor fourteen hours a week in the writing center for their graduate assistantships. In my dual role as manager and peer I work hard to foster a collaborative and even somewhat relaxed approach to tutor training. At our weekly staff meetings the tutors and I take turns leading the discussion of sample student essays and scholarly readings on tutoring theory and practice. We also spend a considerable amount of time role-playing and discussing actual and hypothetical tutoring scenarios.

These training activities are valuable, but I also need assurance that the tutors put into practice the insights gleaned from our meetings. Last year, at the

suggestion of the Rose Hill Writing Program Director, I began observing the tutors as they worked. In my follow-up conversations with each tutor, I invariably asked three questions: What was your student hoping to accomplish in the session? What were you (the tutor) trying to accomplish? How well do you think you and your student succeeded in meeting these goals? My intent with these questions was to encourage the tutor to take the lead in assessing the session, rather than passively accepting my feedback.

Both the tutors and I found these conversations productive, but as a means of assessment the activity seemed incomplete to me. Though the observations took place in the context of routine tutoring appointments, they felt somewhat disconnected from the center's dynamic social habitat wherein tutors routinely confer with one another between and even during sessions, asking questions and suggesting resources. Suspecting that at least some of this productive exchange disappears when the director comes calling, I wondered how I might reduce my role in the evaluation process and find a means of assessment that would take advantage of this nonhierarchical flow of ideas. I soon found myself considering instituting a peer evaluation activity that would require tutors to observe one another's sessions. Peer observation and other forms of peer mentoring already play a crucial role in the English Department's Teaching Practicum, the program that trains graduate students to teach writing courses at the university. Why not use a similar form of pedagogy in the writing center?

As any educator knows, though, peer work can be risky. I initially had doubts about translating this method of evaluation to the tutoring context: What if the tutors regarded the activity as a waste of time–yet another activity to add to their overflowing to-do lists as graduate students? Or what if some tutors resisted learning from colleagues they regarded as below their skill level or experience? And what if–and here my own tendency toward shyness was guiding my thinking–what if peer evaluation just proved awkward?

Yet even with my mental handwringing, I wasn't ready to abandon the idea. It seemed to me that the activity's success, like that of any peer activity, would depend on how it was designed and communicated. With the guidance of the campus Writing Program Director, I crafted a questionnaire for the observers that swapped the loaded term "evaluation" for the more open-ended "observation." I asked tutors to consider specific elements of the sessions they would witness: the apparent goals of the student and tutor, the demeanor of each, as well as effective strategies and challenging moments in the session. Further, since the opening and closing minutes of any appointment are critical, the observers were asked to record what occurred at those times. By inviting the observers to identify moments and strategies that were effective or less so, the activity would yield more constructive feedback than would a vague directive to, say, "discuss your peer's strengths and weaknesses." For their part, the observers also stood to gain; watching a peer make the myriad small decisions that constitute even a 30-minute tutoring session stood to be enormously educational–potentially even more so than having one's own session evaluated.

The questionnaire prompts were as follows:

1. How did the session begin?

2. Based on your observation, what was the student hoping to accomplish during his or her visit?

3. Based on your observation, what was the tutor hoping to accomplish?

4. Describe at least one effective strategy the tutor used and explain why that strategy was effective.

5. Describe a challenge that presented itself and explain how the tutor addressed that challenge.

6. Describe the tutor's demeanor (e.g., communication style, body language) and tone.

7. Describe the student's demeanor and tone.

8. How did the session end?

After conducting follow-up conversations with their peers, the observers turned in their questionnaires. Once everyone had both observed and been observed, each tutor would complete a second questionnaire consisting of two prompts:

1. Reflect on the experience of *observing* your colleague and your subsequent conversation. How, for example, might this experience inform your own tutoring practice? What, if any, observations or questions does it prompt?

2. Reflect on the experience of *being observed* by a colleague and your subsequent conversation. How, for example, might the experience inform your tutoring practice? What, if any, observations or questions does it prompt?

After preparing the two questionnaires, I set about pairing the tutors for the activity. This step presented a challenge. I didn't want the same tutor to both observe and be observed by the same person, so I instituted a chain of assignments: Tutor A observes Tutor B, who in turn observes Tutor C, and so on. These pairings were made solely on the basis of convenience of scheduling for the parties involved. But this neutral criterion also reflected my belief that any dedicated tutor can learn from, and teach, another tutor. After all, this is what happens every day in the writing center.

With the last questionnaire turned in and the exercise complete, I was happy to find that most of the tutors regarded the experience as instructive and in some cases even enjoyable **[2]**. Through reflecting on the feedback and holding some informal follow-up conversations with tutors, I have reached a few tentative conclusions about the role of evaluation in writing center pedagogy. Perhaps the most important thing I learned is that effective evaluation need not be hierarchical. Several tutors described the advantage of observing and being observed by a peer. "Power differentials," wrote Ben, "no matter how informal, still change the way people act under observation and react to advice. The way this [activity] was structured, it effectively doubled the chances that we would learn something valuable through the double duty of giving and receiving feedback." Though I was thrilled that Ben benefited from the intended "double duty" of the activity, I was caught slightly off-guard by his reference to "power differentials." His comment was a good reminder, though, that despite my efforts to make my role as director somewhat informal, the tutors still regard me as an authority figure. At the same time, it was heartening and a bit humbling to see that Ben and his colleagues can grow as tutors without (and sometimes *especially* without) my intervention.

In addition to what it revealed about authority, the activity helped me see that the context of evaluation matters enormously. Just as a well-designed exam asks students to demonstrate skills inherent to the day-to-day work of the course, tutor evaluations should emerge from the routine work of tutoring. Writing centers that rely exclusively on role-playing and staged tutoring sessions to assess their staff may wish to reconsider their approach. The words and gestures of even the most ordinary tutoring appointment are a pedagogical goldmine, and evaluation ideally should be grounded in these authentic exchanges. In their feedback, tutors described with genuine interest their peers' methods for engaging students. "Revision became an ongoing process for Tina and her student," wrote Robert. "By encouraging the student to perform a given rewrite on the spot, Tina was able to offer the student plenty of immediate feedback." Robert's attention to Tina's use of revision illustrates the "double duty" of giving and receiving feedback that Ben identified: Robert's positive evaluation strengthens Tina's self-image as a resourceful tutor, and Robert, having witnessed the effectiveness of on-the-spot revision, may well try out the technique in his own tutoring; at the very least the experience might inspire him to experiment with more responsive, student-centered approaches.

Observation, then, prompts self-evaluation. After observing John, Melanie admitted that she finds "not telling students what to write a little frustrating at times, so I've really pushed myself to … create discussion and make the student take ownership." Similarly, Ana was impressed with Victor's "patient and calm manner. Almost reflexively, I thought about my own desire to jump right in and help a student instead of standing back and letting him or her solve the problem.… In the end, observing Victor was probably more useful for my own sessions than having someone observe me and then telling me what they thought."

Melanie's and Ana's comments illustrate the value of loosening the reins of control when tutoring–a lesson that even the most stimulating discussion of abstract tutoring principles could not have taught half so convincingly. General tutoring axioms ("Always do X" or "Avoid Y"), taught to new tutors and reiterated in staff meetings, have a place in any writing center, but an overemphasis on universal protocols can lead us to measure every tutor-student interaction against an a priori standard of "good" tutoring. One of the strengths of peer observation is that it regards people as individuals, and it treats our curiosity about others as an excellent foundation for learning. Discussing collaboration in the writing center, Andrea Lunsford notes that effective peer work "leads not only to sharper, more critical thinking … but to deeper understanding *of others*" (5) **[3]**. I was pleased to see this truth bear out in the feedback. Tutors often described, with not a little astonishment, how their peers' tutoring styles differed from their own. "Robert has a more discreet and understated approach than I do," remarked Victor in his feedback:

Observing someone else can nudge us out of the worn grooves of our own practice. Likewise, being observed reminds us that we are not alone but that we work within a community.

> His patience, his ability to probe and question the student, and defer, by that one moment, the point where he would suggest the answer himself, often worked, just as often that it did not. But the attitude of not giving up on the student, of not assuming a dogmatic position of "instruction"… made me all the more aware of

the stance of conversational humility which I could aspire to.

Observing someone else can nudge us out of the worn grooves of our own practice. Likewise, being observed reminds us that we are not alone but that we work within a community. In her feedback, Kim admitted that having a peer sit in on one of her sessions "made me feel like I had when I first started working at the writing center–very self-conscious and aware that it was an open space. I suppose the only question this would bring up is: What are the pros and cons of our open workspace when it comes to our tutoring practice? Does the fact that we're always 'performing' for each other to some extent help or hurt us?" I'm sympathetic to Kim's concerns – and never more so than on those days when I step in at the last minute to sub for a sick tutor. But while I wish our workspace were large enough to allow for more private work areas, I've come to regard the public nature of the writing center as, on balance, a good thing. Retreating to our own soundproof corners (whether real or metaphorical) can be tempting, and the world of academia outside the writing center can seem to conspire to make this solitude feel all but inevitable. But this distance can contribute to a dangerous self-sufficiency–the belief that each of us is our best and only resource. Peer observation works from the assumption that none of us is an island, and nor should we be.

I am giving peer observations a second run this year, but before I do, the activity needs a few modifications. Most importantly, I'll rethink the way I handled the questionnaires. Although the tutors shared their feedback in conversation with one another, their written responses were directed at me. It strikes me now as a little ironic that I was the primary audience for written feedback generated in a *peer* activity. Next time, I'll ask each tutor to prepare a separate piece of evaluative prose for his or her observee. This feedback can then go into the tutor's teaching portfolio to serve as an ongoing source of instruction and encouragement.

Revisions notwithstanding, this activity has helped me to rethink the meaning of evaluation in the context of writing center pedagogy. In watching the exercise unfold I was reminded of Paulo Freire's avowal that education "must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (72). It has been liberating to see that evaluation need not be hierarchical or detached from other forms of learning. One of the strengths of writing centers, I think, is that within their walls the roles of student and teacher continually intersect. On a given day, a tutor may be guiding a student through a research project, but in the process she is learning from her student how to ask better, more focused questions; meanwhile she is offering her coworkers a revisable template for tutor-student interaction. As a component of tutor assessment, peer observation is not a departure from the productive network of dialogue that makes up a bustling writing center so much as an attempt to focus in closely, see and appreciate it.

Notes

[1] Fordham has writing centers at each of its two main campuses: the Rose Hill campus in the Bronx and the Lincoln Center campus in Manhattan.

[2] Though my focus here is on the interaction between tutors, it is important to note that the students participating in the sessions also contributed heavily

to the social dynamic of the observations. The students were also under inspection, and their engagement necessarily shaped the course of the sessions. Though it would be very revealing to know how the students reacted to the observation scenario, I have yet to build into the activity a means of gathering their responses.

[3] Emphasis appears in the original text.

Works Cited

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‹ Researching Micromoments in the Writing Center **up** **â€œAnybody there?â€: A Comparison of Writing-Center Coaching and Crisis Counseling ›**